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ABSTRACT

The Tech Prep (TP) program is designed to provide a seamless transition for students between the high school, community college, and four-year college levels so that students can make an easier transition from school to work. In Texas, TP has developed differently from the programs of other states. Texas policy makers created a tri-agency partnership, consisting of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Department of Commerce, to oversee TP development. A consortia approach was utilized, with a total of 25 consortia funded to provide access to TP programs throughout the state. Although this unified approach has afforded Texas a high level of cooperation between the responsible parties, it is sufficiently decentralized to provide maximum latitude to each consortium to develop programs to meet the specific needs of its constituency. The approach also allows each consortium to be independent of its member institutions, allowing it to maintain a balance between the various institutions' interests. Weaknesses of the TP program include an increased risk of inefficiency as a result of the tri-agency partnership and an increased risk of conflict between consortia and their member institutions. Despite the opportunities to improve linkages between secondary and post-secondary institutions and provide extensive feedback to faculty, TP faces threats from reduced federal funding and inter-institutional competition. (MAB)

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Tech Prep Consortia in Texas

A Presentation made at NISOD

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Tech Prep has developed as a major force for educational reform throughout the country. Tech Prep programs have been designed as 4 + 2 + 2 programs: four years of high school education, 2 years of community college education, and an additional 2 years of education at a four-year college leading to a bachelor's degree. The Tech Prep program is designed to provide a seamless transition for the student between these sectors, so that students can more easily transition from school to a work setting. The program is built on the premise that vocational/technical and academic subjects need to be better integrated so as to adequately prepare American students for an increasingly competitive global economy. Tech Prep has also been designed with the assumption that many of the jobs that will be created in the American economy in the coming decades will be ones requiring some postsecondary education, but at a level less than a baccalaureate degree. To better prepare students for this postsecondary education, Tech Prep programs attempt to develop a strong foundation for American high school students in both technical as well as applied academic subjects. The hope is that many Tech Prep high school students who may not otherwise have considered attending college will be motivated to pursue postsecondary education in their Tech Prep career field. These high school students will arrive at the Tech Prep program at the two-year college better prepared in academic and technical education, and two-year college educators will be able to provide a more in depth curriculum better preparing them for their chosen vocational/technical occupation.

Tech Prep programs in two-year colleges are also designed so that students who complete an associate degree have the option to transfer to a four-year college to

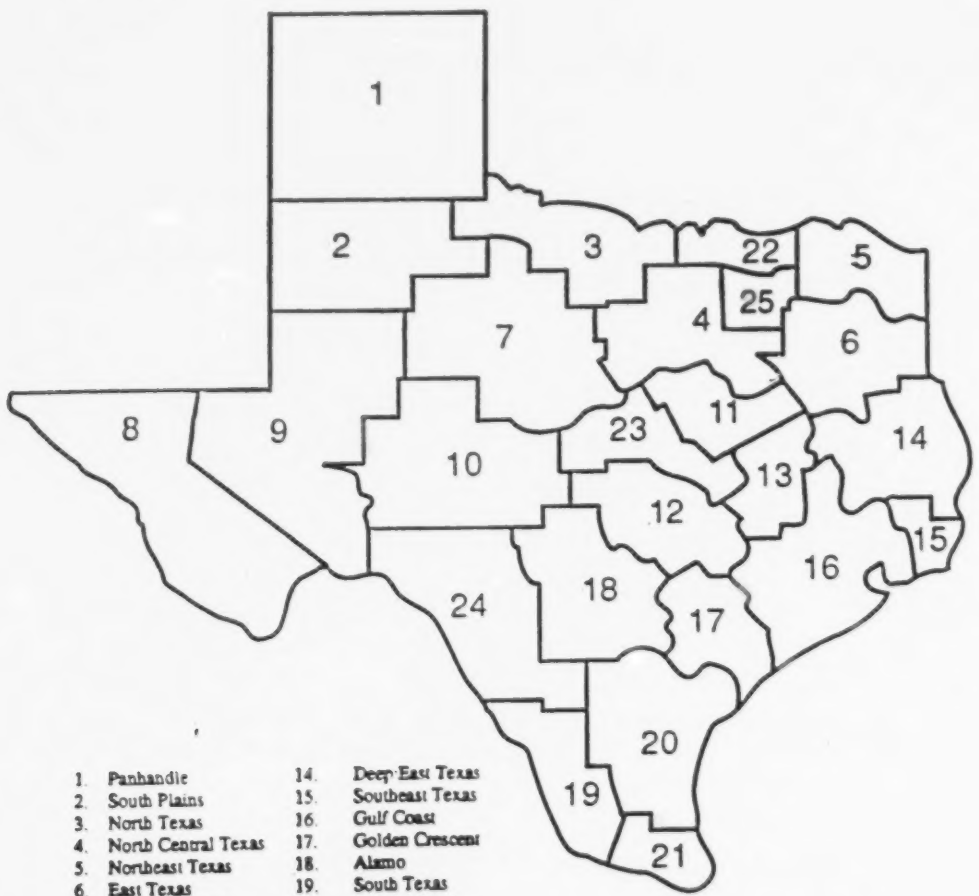
complete a baccalaureate degree. For example, articulation agreements have been created in many states so that two-year college students with an associate of applied science degree have the option of obtaining an inverted bachelor's degree with cooperating four-year institutions. Thus, Tech Prep is designed to make students better prepared to enter a labor market that is demanding increasingly higher levels of academic and technical competence. The program has been designed so that students have options both in their choice of occupation, as well as in the level of education they would like to pursue.

In Texas, Tech Prep has developed somewhat differently than it has in other states. Texas policymakers decided early on to develop Tech Prep into a comprehensive statewide system, rather than taking a piecemeal approach to development. Texas policymakers decided to create a tri-agency partnership to oversee the development of Tech Prep in Texas, rather than delegating responsibility for Tech Prep to a single state agency. As a consequence, the responsibility for Tech Prep development is shared between the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Department of Commerce. Texas policymakers also opted to have Tech Prep be developed using a consortia approach, funding a total of 25 consortia to provide access to Tech Prep programs throughout the state. Each Tech Prep consortium was formed by creating partnerships between independent school districts, two-year colleges, and four-year colleges. The boundaries for almost all of the 25 funded Tech Prep consortia are coterminous with the boundaries for the Quality Work Force Planning Committees that were established to analyze local labor market trends and to develop plans to economically develop

their service areas. Tech Prep is seen by these Quality Work Force Planning Committees as a major educational component of their overall mission.

The 25 Tech Prep consortia that have developed in the state of Texas span the state, with a mix of urban and rural consortia (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Texas Tech Prep Consortia



1. Panhandle
2. South Plains
3. North Texas
4. North Central Texas
5. Northeast Texas
6. East Texas
7. West Central Texas
8. Upper Rio Grande
9. Permian Basin
10. Concho Valley
11. Heart of Texas
12. Capital
13. Brazos Valley
14. Deep East Texas
15. Southeast Texas
16. Gulf Coast
17. Golden Crescent
18. Alamo
19. South Texas
20. Coastal Bend
21. Lower Rio Grande
22. Texoma
23. Central Texas
24. Middle Rio Grande
25. Global Edge

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Each consortium typically has a staff with at minimum a director, one or more clerical staff, and a person responsible for the development of curriculum. With one exception, community colleges serve as the fiscal agent for these consortia. The typical consortium is made up of a number of local ISDs, one or more two-year colleges, and one or more four-year colleges. Each consortium has a steering committee with representatives from the secondary and postsecondary sectors, as well as representatives from business and industry, labor, and governmental agencies. A number of other standing committees are typically found in these consortia, including ones for planning, curriculum development, evaluation, and public relations.

Each consortium has been allowed to develop its own unique mix of Tech Prep program offerings. The mix of Tech Prep programs offered has been determined primarily based on local labor market information provided by the Quality Work Force Planning Committees. Decisions as to what programs to offer have also been influenced by the programs and expertise already existing within each consortium's boundaries. Each consortium typically started out offering a small number of Tech Prep programs, and has gradually increased the number of programs offered with each passing year. Each Tech Prep program to be offered has to be approved by either the Texas Education Agency, if it is a secondary program, or the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, if it is a community college program.

Strengths of Tech Prep Consortia in Texas

There are a number of strengths to the way that Texas has set out to develop Tech Prep programs throughout the state. One of the strengths is that state policymakers recognized the importance of providing comprehensive access to Tech

Prep programs throughout the state. Rather than attempting a piecemeal approach, state policymakers early on set into motion a statewide system of 25 consortia that provides access to at least some Tech Prep programs for secondary and postsecondary students in virtually every county in the state. This was an ambitious route to take for Texas given its size and the incremental nature in which most state educational reform is undertaken.

An additional strength of the Texas model for developing Tech Prep programs is the cosponsorship by the Tri-Agency Partnership composed of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Department of Commerce. To forge this type of linkage among state agencies is a rather remarkable political feat in its own right, and a credit to the vision of legislators and policymakers in Austin. Having the sponsorship of three state agencies has fostered cooperation among state agencies that may otherwise have had a natural tendency to compete with one another. This joint sponsorship means that the development of Tech Prep consortia has received the support of three state agencies rather than just one. This unique buy-in by three state agencies has tripled the number of stakeholders looking out for the welfare of this educational program. This political support has undoubtedly helped buffer the program from critics who may not support the Tech Prep approach to education reform. The strong political support may also have helped stave off Congressional attempts to rescind federal support for Tech Prep for the 1996 fiscal year.

Another strength of Tech Prep development in Texas is the consortium approach to the development of the system. Texas chose the path of decentralization,

giving maximum latitude to each consortium to develop the mix of Tech Prep programs that best met the economic development needs of its local service area. This flexibility helped local stakeholders--representatives from business and industry, labor, and government agencies, as well as secondary and postsecondary representatives--to buy-in to the Tech Prep approach to educational reform. These stakeholders were given the opportunity to decide their priorities for the development of Tech Prep programs, thereby fostering maximum cooperation and commitment. If the state had taken a more centralized approach to the development of Tech Prep programs, it would have sacrificed much of this essential local buy-in.

Another strength of the consortium approach is that each consortium is theoretically an entity independent from the institutions with which it is composed. Although the Tech Prep consortia almost exclusively use community colleges as their fiscal agents, the Tech Prep consortia are independent of any educational institution and do not fall under the administrative control of the community college serving as the fiscal agent. This perception of independence from all educational institutions is an important source of credibility for Tech Prep consortia attempting to solicit participation from ISDs, and other two-year and four-year colleges. This perception of independence makes it easier for other educational institutions to see the Tech Prep consortium as representing equally the interests of all sectors, rather than primarily the interests of the two-year college sector.

Weaknesses of Texas Tech Prep Consortia

There are also a number of weaknesses in the way that Tech Prep has developed in the state of Texas. One of the potential weaknesses from the consortium

perspective is the need to work with representatives from three separate state agencies in attempting to have programs approved and in following state regulations. The Tri-Agency Partnership model presumes that there is a close cooperation and clear lines of communication between the three agencies in handling consortium requests for resources and program approvals. It assumes that there are staff members knowledgeable about Tech Prep policy issues in all three state agencies. It is not hard to imagine that this need for cooperation and close communication can be problematic in state agencies experiencing staff turnover, downsizing, and normal political battles over turf issues. Thus, although having a partnership arrangement may increase the number of stakeholders in support of Tech Prep, it may also serve to exacerbate the problems consortia experience in dealing with state bureaucracies.

Another potential weakness is the perceived independence of Tech Prep consortia from administrative control of the community colleges serving as their fiscal agents. Although independent in theory, there have been a number of instances where Tech Prep directors have come into conflict with their fiscal agents over issues of autonomy. Administrators at two-year colleges argue that if they are fiscally responsible for a Tech Prep consortium, then they should be given the authority to oversee the allocation of financial resources for the consortium. Tech Prep directors argue that the Tri-Agency Partnership deliberately designed the Tech Prep consortia to be physically housed on a community college campus, but to be an autonomous unit not under the direct administrative control of community college administrators. This is an ongoing tension between some Tech Prep directors and campus

administrators, and the debate weakens the perceived independence of some Tech Prep consortia.

Opportunities for Texas Tech Prep Consortia

There is a growing sentiment in the state that Tech Prep has the potential to be a powerful vehicle for reforming vocational/technical education. The Tech Prep approach to educational reform has captured the attention and commitment of many educators and business and industry representatives. Given the increasing emphasis at the federal and state levels on economic development and on developing a more globally competitive work force, Tech Prep or the more encompassing concept of School to Work will continue to be a high national and state priority. Tech Prep consortia in Texas have the opportunity to play a pivotal role in restructuring vocational/technical education at both the secondary and postsecondary levels.

Another major opportunity that Tech Prep consortia face is the opportunity to improve the linkages between high school and two-year colleges, and between two-year colleges and four-year colleges. A number of researchers have noted that there is relatively little communication between two-year colleges and other sectors of our K-16 system of education (Cohen & Brawer, 1991). Faculty from one sector rarely talk to faculty from other sectors about curriculum, assessment activities, and student development. Faculty in high schools rarely receive feedback from their two-year college counterparts about the relative preparation of their students, and faculty in two-year colleges rarely receive feedback from their four-year college counterparts about the relative preparation of their students. This lack of meaningful feedback across

sectors limits the ability of faculty in all sectors to know what changes in policies and practices might improve their programs.

Perhaps the single greatest strength of Tech Prep is the opportunity it provides for faculty to receive feedback about their students, their curriculum, and their assessment practices. Tech Prep provides a vehicle for faculty in high schools and community colleges and four-year colleges to communicate with each other in order to create a seamless transition between the sectors for students. Many of the faculty in these sectors may have had little, if any, previous opportunities to communicate with one another. The Tech Prep approach to educational reform promotes a view of education in a larger context than just an institutional frame of reference. It forces faculty to think about the specific role of their sector in student development, and to place the curriculum they teach in the larger context of a continuum of skills and essential knowledge elements that is covered across several sectors. The most significant reform that Tech Prep could offer to our system of education is in promoting within faculty and administrators a shift in their perspectives from a narrow concern with student development in their institution or sector to a broader concern with student development across the educational system as a whole.

Threats to Tech Prep Consortia in Texas

The most immediate threat to Tech Prep consortia in Texas is the attempt to cut off federal funding for Tech Prep programs. Although the attempts to rescind federal funding for Tech Prep for the 1996 fiscal year were defeated, the whole issue has raised questions in the minds of many around the state about the long-term viability of these consortia. The most fundamental question is whether Tech Prep consortia will

continue in some form when all federal funding for them is eliminated. One might expect that the stronger consortia would continue to receive support from their institutional partners, while the more marginal ones might very well be eliminated. Clearly, it is in the long-term best interests of every Tech Prep consortium to plan strategically for a future with little or no reliance on additional federal funding. Many Tech Prep consortia in Texas will receive School-to-Work implementation grants which will allow them to broaden the scope of the work-based learning activities available to their students. Consortia need to take steps now to ensure their survival and institutionalization for the day when federal funding is decreased or eliminated.

A more persistent threat to the future of Tech Prep consortia are the strong centrifugal forces of institutional parochialism and competition between sectors. In times of downsizing and retrenchment, a common response is to attempt to increase your institution's share of scarce resources at the expense of other institutions. In the Texas context, as state agencies downsize, there may be increased competition between the Tri-Agency partnership for control of the resources devoted to Tech Prep and other School-to-Work programs. This competition between state agencies for these scarce resources has the potential to hamper the cooperation and communication necessary to effectively manage these programs.

At the consortium level, Tech Prep is dependent on the ability of individual institutions--high schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges to cooperate with one another in the best interests of students preparing for a technical career. If there is a perception that the benefits of participation in Tech Prep fall disproportionately on one sector, there may be a growing unwillingness for the other

sectors to participate. Competition for students is particularly a source of tension between community colleges and four-year colleges. If four-year college faculty and administrators see that Tech Prep programs at the two-year college level decrease the enrollment of students in their own technical programs, they may be reluctant supporters of the Tech Prep concept. The motivation of institutions in higher education to compete with one another is deeply engrained in our system of higher education, and may make hammering out articulation agreements between two-and four-year college Tech Prep programs particularly challenging.

Conclusions about Tech Prep in Texas

The consortia approach to Tech Prep in Texas has promoted the cause of equity, excellence, and efficiency in the state. Equity has been promoted by ensuring that there are consortia sufficient to provide access to at least some Tech Prep programs for students in virtually every county in the state. In all consortia, special efforts are being made to ensure participation of special populations as defined by the Carl Perkins Act, including individuals who are disabled, educationally and economically disadvantaged, incarcerated, or limited English speaking. The state should be commended for its efforts to ensure that Tech Prep programs are available for virtually all secondary and postsecondary students.

Excellence has been promoted by allowing individual Tech Prep consortia to develop their own Tech Prep programs with the input of all the relevant stakeholders at the local level. This approach ensures that the programs offered are relevant to the needs of the local economy and that local experts have been involved in the development and assessment of each program. In further promoting excellence,

mechanisms need to be developed so that individual consortia can share their experiences in developing Tech Prep programs with other consortia. Information about exemplary policies and practices can help foster a spirit of cooperation among the various consortia and can help maximize the talent development of Tech Prep students throughout the state.

Efficiency has been promoted by Tech Prep consortia by pooling the expertise and resources of local experts in developing Tech Prep programs. Having local experts in business and industry, governmental agencies, and labor donate their expertise in the development of Tech Prep programs has reaped tremendous benefits to the state. Many business and industries have donated personnel and equipment as well as time and energy in partnerships with secondary and postsecondary institutions in developing Tech Prep programs. These donations of time, money, and energy have resulted in high quality programs at a minimal cost to the state and to taxpayers. Further efficiencies can be achieved as Tech Prep consortia work out articulation agreements with each other allowing students regional and statewide access to Tech Prep programs of their choice. Clearly, Tech Prep consortia provide a good example of the benefits that local areas and the state reap when educational institutions cooperate with business and industry, labor, and government in promoting the development of students.

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